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Companion to Thesis Production
Master of Liberal Studies
Indiana University South Bend

# *Without Mouths*

**Appendix A**

# OTHELLO
# "WITHOUT MOUTHS":
# DIRECTOR'S OBSERVATION OF THE FOCUS ON COMMUNICATION AND DESTRUCTION IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO

Novella Brooks de Vita

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
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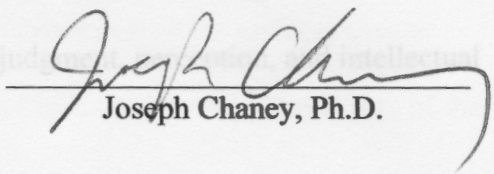
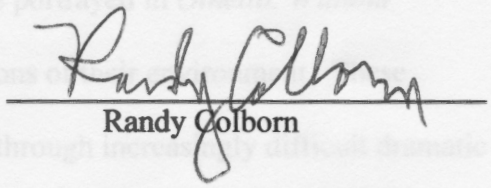
**Appendix B**

**Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Liberal Studies.**

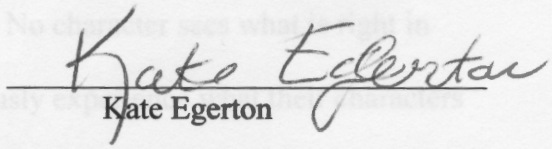
**MLS Committee:**



**Joseph Chaney, Ph.D.**



**Randy Colborn**



**Kate Egerton**

**May 10, 2007**

## Without Mouths: Director's Observation of the Focus on Communication and Destruction in William Shakespeare's *Othello*

In order to communicate the concept of foil characters that must rely on outside sources and symbolism to communicate, rather than direct interaction. In the production of *Othello: Without Mouths*, both nights recorded on DVD, that forms the "public intellectual" or creative component of this thesis project, I directed the actors to portray cerebrally motivated characters and relationships. Each actor had to rely on his or her character's—however accurate or faulty—sense of judgment, perception, and intellectual and emotional communication and satisfaction.

The actors made their characters, as they are portrayed in *Othello: Without Mouths*, depend upon highly subjective interpretations of their environment. These highly individual interpretations see the characters through increasingly difficult dramatic encounters, even as those interpretations fail them. No character sees what is right in front of him or her. I required my actors to vicariously experience what their characters feel they experience, based on this production's interpretation of Shakespeare's original text. Each actor was given the task during initial meetings with me to create for his or her character an in-depth history through private journals, shared and private emails with me or various cast members, and lengthy phone and knee-to-knee conversations with other significant interactive characters. Favorite memories, hobbies, painful secrets discovered during the early rehearsal process, which informally lasted two months, and other personal touches gave each actor a degree of investment, as I was reminded many times when each actor bemoaned during rehearsals about the life-changing poor choices his or her character continued to make and much brainstorming about how the character

might avoid an inevitable fate, in his or her character's potential ability to rise above the weakness that made him or her a susceptible part of Iago's elaborate scheme. Each actor reported increasing frustration with the choices the characters make in Shakespeare's text. In fact, part of rehearsals included time for some actors to vent disgust with their characters' actions, or lack of action, in the scene at hand. These weaknesses of character, of course, make it possible for Iago's machinations to work; my actors' understanding of each foible and their incorporation of its corresponding potential to affect them and their ability to resist into each actor's portrayal of his or her character was meant to give a sense of hopeful anticipation and resistance to the inevitability of the growing horror of Shakespeare's *Othello.* I wanted the audience, as well as the actors, to continue to hope that, this time, it might change and that they might each rise above Iago's manipulation of their worst qualities.

For the production of *Othello: Without Mouths*, I rely upon the most classic Russian Formalist acting preparation: actors for each character had to write copious journal entries, e-mail messages, and hold terminable conversations with me and with one another about their backgrounds and internal and interactive relationships. I did this in order to achieve the kind of viscerally expressive production that can reflect the power of what is done but never said, which needs the integrity of nuanced exchanges; looks must communicate more than words. All verbal communication has become suspect in Shakespeare's play and is no longer able to be taken at face value thanks to Iago. Iago has manipulated the others' ability to hear and understand one another's words. Since Iago reads the subtext of verbal communication to understand it, she reinterprets normally inoffensive statements and behaviors as their less appealing opposites for her

listeners. Each character's words are full of multiple meanings, individualistically interpreted by each character hearing them. Even the naively straightforward Desdemona's statements are *double-entendres*. Perhaps because of their profound understanding of their characters' backgrounds and motives, the only actors comfortable with their roles were those who played Desdemona and Iago. The other actors all had, in spite of attachment to their characters, moral conflicts with their characters' behaviors and choices. This clear internal conflict leant to the actor's portrayal of the play's overall sense of conflict. With the actors', and therefore their characters', painful personal struggles made public in performance, it was my goal to invite the audience's empathy while feeding the conflict into the tragedy's increasing tension. Since that sense of empathy had to be deeply running through the fabric of the entire production, I required my actors to find some point of commonality with their characters. One of the more difficult steps of character-building for many cast members was the point when they had to explain to me, during one of our character-building sessions, how they could bear to own some of their characters' worst behaviors. While some actors loathed certain aspects of their characters, they still understood what thoughts and fears drove them to be that way. The cast's total, and sometimes painful, immersion into the psyches of the play's characters provided much atmosphere to drive the story of my edited script.

In fact, finding the proper cast was an adventure in itself. This production's Othello was crucial. A reason that *Othello*, as a project, held such appeal was greatly due to the opportunity to use this production's actor, Ceschino, in the title role. A number of directors—student, community, and professional—have remarked how much they would love to use Ceschino as Othello. I was also aware that while he was flattered by these

directors' collective enthusiasm, Ceschino did not care to play that role. I could not blame him. Othello's blind and simple weakness and his extreme vulnerability are frustrating if one cannot interpret them with empathetic understanding. Having interpreted Boracchio's scheming complicity and conflicting loyalties so sensitively that the reviewer for Notre Dame's production of *Much Ado about Nothing* described his performance as the play's major subplot, Ceschino has also moved audiences with his interpretation of Hamlet's father's terrifying and heartbreaking ghost, the mad Scotsman Wallace bent on murdering Henry IV in Notre Dame Summer Shakespeare's *Falstaff's Dream*, the atrociously murdered French cavalier, the trusting Le Fer of *Henry V*, and the brooding, ever-present Gregory in Damon Runyon Repertory Theater's *Romeo and Juliet.*

Content with the autonomy of interpreting characters who move the story from outside the limelight, Ceschino brought deep Shakespearean understanding of conflict and violence to the role of Othello. I was convinced that, if Othello was capable of intellectual depth and emotional complexity, Ceschino could discover and express these qualities through his characterization. Although, to the end, he disapproved of his character's moral dilemma and self-sabotaging choices, I feel confident that Ceschino's Othello represents the highly intellectualized and secretly overwhelmed successful man of African descent functioning among those whose racism conflicts with their need of his genius and his skills. *Othello* has traditionally been played without an understanding either of Othello's intelligence or any empathetic awareness of Iago's vulnerability. As previously played in stage and screen productions, Othello's strongest suits are bestial rage—found in the Othello of Orson Welles—and unbridled sexual energy—represented

in the Othello of Laurence Fishburne. Ever the scapegoated outsider, Othello has, until *Othello: Without Mouths*, remained a symbol of exotic and passionate Otherness. Othello risks an unattractive and unwholesome character portrayal. Of course, I felt very sure that my status as Ceschino's older sister would entitle me to his participation in spite of his reservations—I hoped. Luckily for me, articulate lobbying, an excellent verbal defense, a year of persistent persuasion, and deep brotherly affection won his participation in my production.

Gestures had to communicate more than declarations, and hints more than shouts, like when Othello accuses his wife of being the "Whore of Venice," in order to show the instability and unreliability of a world in which nothing is only representative of itself. The actors had to carefully cooperate with each other and the physical dimensions of their venue in order to show the characters' constantly shifting understanding of their own and others' roles and characteristics. This severe and inconstant interpretation of others' motives is what gave moral liberty to allow a wildly devoted husband to strangle his wife with his bare hands a matter of days after their marriage, a devastating death sentence that was based on the flimsy evidence of a handkerchief and a few moments of eavesdropping on a totally unrelated conversation.

My particular use of the venue and the placement and movement of the actors were meant to share with the audience the sense of movement, space-time, insecurity, shift, and shadowing implications never made clear but always threatening in this space, an intimate auditorium with all spaces, including audience seats, available for the actors' use. This allows a disturbing, vicarious experience of the characters' travails. The scenes appear to feed into one another as each interaction spirals in upon itself, intensifying

before it ends, with the actors caught up in the sequences of disturbing vignettes. While there were pauses between scenes during the production's run, most characters are not even afforded a change of costume. I edited the original script so that conversations between characters at first picked up right where they left off when last onstage, then began to pile onto one another, so that onstage only snippets of important plot development were revealed. Actors' physical interactions dangerously welcomed the audience to participate in the story. Cassio and Roderigo's drunken fight scene nearly toppled onto the audience, forcing direct, rather than vicarious, experience of the story. The idea was to transform the audience into the awakened and frightened Cyprians, who wondered where this new chaos was leading them. Othello's booming bass voice filled the entire space even as he entered the auditorium—still needing to cross from the back of the room to the stage. This outburst significant of omniscient authority brought to life Desdemona's legitimate worry as the play progressed. Venice's powerful Duke, played by Dr. Dave Stefancic, then rose from among audience members to take his seat at the head of the cast and dole out their fates. What other characters, the audience was meant to wonder, were hidden among them? This was one of the stronger dramatic statements intended to make viewers question their complicity in the events of the play and the guilt and defense of those responsible for it.

In my production, Othello directs the defense of his courtship of Desdemona toward the audience, making the people in it honorary and temporary members of the Venetian council, judges of the lovers, Othello and Desdemona. They are close enough—thanks to the intimate space—to see the wife's adoration and the husband's protective dedication, close enough to see the changes from Othello's professional, military defense

demeanor to his fragile, hopeful glances shared with his wife. The Duke's exit from the stage after hearing the General's defense of his elopement was constructed to be as intriguing as his entrance; he mysteriously surfaced in the audience to sit and watch the play with no clear indication, such as of if and when he would again rise and join the cast. Who, then, would the audience be in my production, or would all present play a part in the drama?

I hoped to intimidate the audience by constantly suggesting that it is also the cast, not only because I wanted to give the audience a sense of playing a direct role, but also because I wanted to make it susceptible to identifying with the alternately morbid and high-spirited efforts of the cast to confront, impel, or head off the impending tragedy. None of the actors in the cast particularly liked to hear Ceschino bellow, though he has a lovely bass-baritone, as my brother's booming voice can be quite loud and intimidating. Their desire to not be the characters screamed at translated well and quite naturally into the characters' own discomforts. The characters on the stage preempted Othello's fury, anxiously awaiting his increasingly frequent resounding bellows and consciously watching themselves in Othello's presence.

Believing in his or her own supposed contributions to Othello's displeasure, each character, except for Iago, remained unsure how to behave. Cassio eventually ended up avoiding all contact with Othello. In this production, even Emilia became strident and jumpy, though still obedient to Othello, as she became increasingly aware of her unwitting complicity in the destruction of Desdemona's marriage. Her playful, albeit frustrated, attempts to get the handkerchief back from her cousin, in retrospect, look completely inappropriate and insufficient. The actress's resentment of Emilia's socially

conditioned inability to confront Othello with what she knew of Iago's deceit translated itself, in this production, as Emilia's all-inclusive frustration and dread.

In *Othello: Without Mouths*, I played the role of Iago; therefore, Iago really does mirror Othello in this production in many ways. While, originally, I cast another actress to play the role in order to cooperate with my thesis project committee's preference that I not direct and act at the same time, I ended up needing to fill the role. Played by brother and sister, the two characters can actually look like halves of the same whole, sharing a number of physical traits—a yin and yang of Machiavelli's complete leader. Ceschino's Othello was, as far as gendered identity, an asexual extension of himself. Likewise, Iago was not intended to be strongly feminine. Her personality was developed through the cerebral asexuality of the actor's personal interpretation. There are scholars who cannot visualize Iago as a non-homosexual, non-transvestite, non-transexual character. Some professors may ask why I have not performed the role in drag. Iago and Othello have nearly identical dress. They are both in uniform. Some may interpret uniform as masculine. In that case, Iago is in drag, attempting to be male through station though female through physiology. Iago became "female" and suffered as a Venetian outcast not because she interpreted herself as a feminine woman, but because her society interpreted and decided on her gendered and therefore social identity. She is restricted by her body, so she develops her mind. Othello is the noble, powerful brawn, and Iago is the wily, subversive brain. The final casting of male and female siblings makes this halving of the Machiavellian—the witty and invincible leader, not the Villain or the Machiavel—more apparent. Whereas the male character may clearly have learned to depend on strength, it is obvious that his female counterpart must survive on wit, as this Iago's muscle mass is

nowhere near that of Othello's. Because both actors have a background in dance and athletics, the two can comfortably balance each other's carriage onstage and appear to subconsciously mimic one another's the movements. This balance is especially evident in Iago's mirror imaging of Othello's gestures in scenes involving only the two characters. However, despite the similarity of bearing and appearance, there are few ways by which the two can "speak" with one another. Though they are so alike, Othello and Iago cannot directly communicate and take one another at face value. Both actors needed, to make this clear, to watch one another for symbolic gestures or inconsistencies of action. Othello and Iago very nearly ignore what the other actually says in the pursuit of catching all unsaid subtext.

Desdemona's constant affectionate caressing of Othello, a character tic created by the actress, stroking his arms and chest, signifies her soothing of the bestial influences taking over her husband's mind. Movement is as likely to carry extreme significance, in this production, as objects. Desdemona, in this production, was increasingly closed off from her husband as his false accusations increased. At times open to the audience—facing it—or protectively closing herself off from the audience by turning away, her body was directed less and less toward her husband. Ceschino's Othello had to communicate the conviction that, if he reaches Desdemona physically, perhaps he will open her supposedly closed affections to him. He approached her in Act III, but, if not already shut out by their poor communication and resistance to hearing one another, he was excluded from her metaphoric embrace when he has no choice but to speak to her back, must watch her walk away, and must lean over her shoulder to be heard when he accused her of being a Venetian whore. Physical proximity, therefore, only emphasized the

growing distance between the newly married couple. Othello initially sees his wife as she sees others and as she wishes to be seen. At first, they share a perception that is both obvious and honest. As the play opens, Othello is as innocent and hopeful as Desdemona. The two trust the surface expressions of their own motives as well as each other's; while they may be aware of their own deepest insecurities, they do not think they will be affected by them. One of the most intense impasses in *Without Mouths* is the pre-murder bedroom argument in which two reasonable, deeply in love people cannot take what each other is saying at face value and save themselves from the rapidly approaching tragedy. The power in Desdemona's character with which she was born and raised is portrayed superbly by the *Othello*: *Without Mouths* Desdemona actress, Ashley, whose performance in this play won her acceptance at The New School of Drama in New York City.

Surrounded by a rather tall cast, the diminutive Ashley is never overwhelmed by her fellow actors' stature. Likewise, Ashley's Desdemona refuses to be ignored. She catches the eye, attention, and affection of those on stage and in the audience when she takes the stage and convincingly bullies both Othello and Cassio. Othello, tall and broad, is wrapped around his tiny wife's cute finger, and Cassio, as tall as Desdemona when he kneels, has not the strength—or heart—to pull free from her grip when she asks him to stay and watch her argue in his favor. Because she is small and very pretty, with a relaxed and calming manner of speaking and the obvious desire to avoid friction, one does not expect Ashley's inventive interpretation of Desdemona's hidden hard edge or obstinacy. Her drives and motives are on the surface, yet impossible to read. For the audience of *Without Mouths*, Desdemona's clear and naïve affection make the idea of her

being deceptive difficult to believe. Her perspective, unclouded by suspicion, ideally strives to take the world at face value.

A unique aspect of this production is the background shared by Iago and Desdemona, in that both were lovingly and loveably raised by Emilia. My actors and I came up with character histories that were checked only against one another and against Shakespeare's sprinkles of character history in the script. This Emilia was a far more major and influential character than the original by Shakespeare, so her history required her to intimately know both Iago and Desdemona. The most attractive reason for this to be was that she raised both women. This is hinted at by the striking similarities of charming mannerisms shared by this production's Desdemona and Iago, both of whom naturally smile, cajole, caress, and appear to be fragile, persuasive, and sweet-natured in the face of male aggressiveness. Of course, Desdemona's privileged upbringing allows her guileless winning ways in this particular production to be quite trusting and sincere. Though Shakespeare's original character has led many literary analysts to question Desdemona's sincerity, a number of these papers found at the 2005 Modern Language Association Convention, this production's ingénue was every bit as honest about her motives as she was physically affectionate toward other characters onstage. Desdemona believes that demonstrations of affection should be taken at face value. There is no shortage of loving caresses from her. Iago believes that demonstrations of affection should manipulate people into performing the actions desired by the Machiavellian, just as should any of her other repertoire of necessary behaviors. This history was developed primarily by Johnea, who portrayed Emelia, in her character development meetings, and further supported by Ashley. As director, I was open to individual histories as long as

they correlated with one another. As I was not interested in focusing this production on a pop culture caricature of a lesbian marriage, nor did I wish to delve into transsexual transvestism with a drag Iago, and the thought of my real thesis being ignored in favor of viewers' psychoanalysis of an incestuous marriage situation was unbearable, my only request—and one my sister already had in mind—was that she construct a cousins' history to which my Iago could agree. That history constructed an Iago isolated from all but her cousin, and distrustful even of this impeccably-mannered young woman who raised her. The winning sweetness of character equally inculcated by a protective Emilia in both her charge and her cousin has become Desdemona's true expression of self. That same seductive sweetness is Iago's most powerful dissimulator of her guile.

In *Othello: Without Mouths*, Emilia inadvertently displayed more affection and favor for her ward than for her own cousin, a stark reminder to the already embittered Iago of her social invisibility in courtly spheres. Accompanying even Emilia's gentle admonitions of Desdemona is a flurry of reassuring, gentle caresses, reaffirming Desdemona's sense of confidence and accomplishment. Iago, on the other hand, never receives such positive nonverbal feedback from her cousin. Due to the constant and relentless experience of that isolation, Iago interprets displays of affection as show, tools to be used for her own ends.

Over the course of the performance, Iago touches but is rarely touched. She comforts Desdemona, pushes Roderigo, and cajoles Cassio. Roderigo's initiated contact with Iago consists of pushing her out of his way as she interrupts his attempts to wake and warn Desdemona's father of her disappearance, rousing Brabantio's fury instead, and shortly before his death at Iago's hands, when, for comfort, Roderigo reaches for Iago's

hand and even her coat as he waits to ambush Cassio. Othello reaches out to Iago, literally, when, distraught, he tries to strangle her while he still doubts the deception.

Cassio may be the only character who consistently breaks through Iago's barrier of distance, making himself both shockingly disrespectful to Othello's Ancient and desirable, in his physical demonstrations of affection. Completely uninhibited in his drunkenness, Cassio smothers Iago with physical contact and barely gives her an inch of personal space. After he is admonished by Othello and mourning the loss of his reputation and position, Cassio grabs hold of Iago as she attempts to soothe him, pulling her into his own sphere of experience before literally shaking her back out of that connection. Slandering his lover, Cassio again invades Iago's space, throwing his arms around Iago to illustrate Bianca's affection for him. The more distressed Cassio becomes, the more physically involved his communications become with Iago. For Iago, this is both appealing and distressing. However inadvertently, Cassio forces a bond with Iago which Iago, confused by the clash of this trust and intimacy with her consuming spite, increasingly commits herself to destroy.

Desdemona, so affectionate with others, does not reach out, physically or emotionally, to Iago. Where then, Iago's behavior toward Desdemona questions, is the sincerity of Desdemona's affection? As for convincing Othello of the potential for his wife to have an affair, Iago can rely upon Desdemona's exclusivity in doling out affection: there must be a reason that Cassio is included among the few—otherwise consisting of Othello and Emilia—who are treated to Desdemona's physical and verbal acknowledgment and displays of loving admiration.

Usually appearing obtuse, Ceschino decided that his Othello would appear nobly sensitive and reserved in the extreme, in the face of delicate Desdemona's pushy overtures on behalf of Cassio, while Cassio's braying braggadocio about his exploits with Bianca are harsh, almost as crass as if he were actually impugning Desdemona's chastity. This unnecessary dumbshow of Cassio's in the face of the building tragedy of subconscious communication predominating over and eventually overwhelming direct communication appears to be even more tragic to the audience of *Without Mouths* is that Cassio's affair with Bianca strikes them as the mirror love story of the play. What Cassio and Bianca have in common is that both are loners who have striven to become successful in their professions at the cost of relational stability. In this play, Bianca's actress, Anhmarie, described in the character history established through email correspondence and character-building sessions, Bianca's career as that of a professional escort who stops well short of actual sexual relations with her clients and who is, in fact, threatened and repulsed by physical closeness. This aversion of Bianca's is a true expression of the character of the actress in trying to establish appropriately informative displays of intimacy for the audience's investment in the depth and sensitivity of the relationship between Bianca and Cassio. The wonderfully painful physical shyness that the two actors, Anhmarie and Tedd, shared in common, previous to joining the cast, made their attempted physical interaction that much more vulnerable and tentative for the audience. The audience reacted as if it felt the hesitation, the vulnerability, the lack of ease when Cassio and Bianca let down the guard of their public personas and tried to embrace onstage. On Bianca's part, the sense of threat was deeply felt, as developing the reputation of a common prostitute would damage her being in demand as a professional

escort by men of good reputation. Therefore, her vulnerability to Cassio and his betrayal of their intimacy by trashing her to Iago were meant to strike the audience as painful. Yet, the audience had already seen the tenderness Cassio was trying to mask and heard him lament his fear of the loss of his own highborn, high-achieving reputation.

I was repeatedly reminded by audience members both nights and by DVD viewers that Iago was a frightening character in that she was so sweet and yet ruthless. I was reprimanded for leading these individuals astray, as they thought that such a sweetly behaved character must be equally moral. They were swayed by Iago's constant smile and seductive charm and, therefore, told me they understood the rest of the cast's susceptibility to the character. At the same time, Iago seems so fragile in this performance, knocked off her feet as she tries to come between the fighting Roderigo and Cassio, knocked off the table as she tries to join and encourage Cassio's drunken carouse, and genuinely trembling in the face of Othello's wrath, that she seems far from invincible, qualities adopted not by choice, but by the fact that Ceschino, Matt and Tedd are all much bigger than I and have no physical difficulty sending me flying in any direction. It seemed to the above-mentioned reviewers that it should be easy to unmask her to Othello and set everything to rights, but Shakespeare's seamless and relentless development allows even for Iago's weaknesses, thus leaving room for the hope that fuels this production's tension. In that hope, the audience preserved personal investment in the reality of the events onstage, as I was rewarded to hear multiple times after both performances and dvd viewings of the play.

An Iago whose desire to please and be liked and whose social training to placate and mollify are constantly before the audience is unexpected and therefore unpredictable.

Many audience members and DVD reviewers informed me that they could not help but sympathize with the socially disadvantaged girl who aspired to positions of power through the subservient means allowed her. In *Without Mouths*, Iago picks up the mess after Roderigo and Cassio's fight and appears to be straightening Othello's bedroom, thus symbolizing the caretaker role others expect her to play, while a complacent but distraught Othello paces, pontificates, and asks her advice. Scenes such as this presented a still-life cameo to the audience of the inversion of roles that Iago performed, simply by immersing herself and the cast in the defeat of her aspirations. The audience became aware, through scenes such as these, that Iago's scheme could succeed despite her vulnerabilities and need for approval and protection, because of her own fatalistic acceptance of the limits personally and socially imposed upon her. *Without Mouths*, therefore, was unique in its consistent development of audience sympathy for Iago, even as the audience dreaded the outcome of her actions.

Emilia must not only reveal the truths of Desdemona's affection and fidelity, but she loyally shadows her ward, reluctantly leaving Desdemona's side only out of her remaining obedience to Othello. Her forceful admonitions of Othello ring through the auditorium, nearly as strong in volume as Othello's thundering speeches. Emilia becomes the narrator of the subtext within the play, an eavesdropper onstage for the audience, reading aloud from the metaphorical pages of each of the protagonists. Each character is stripped of the humanity or personality which identifies him or her, becoming a small object with which the larger story is told. These characters are drawn into being objects instead of persons, stock figures in a medieval morality play, by the use of lifeless things and trivial events. Othello's handkerchief, Iago's notebook, a laugh, a movement,

something that on its own has no great importance, builds into a reservoir of information from which multiple characters read multiplied meanings, which leads us to the following point.

In *Without Mouths*, Othello finds himself an unwilling voyeur, an audience member unable to affect the goings-on onstage. In this production, using the overlapping conversational technique that made *It Came from Outer Space* a silver screen cult classic, *Without Mouths* features an Othello I have distractedly mumble his crucial lines just offstage, out of the lights and behind props, when Iago sets him up to eavesdrop on Cassio's defensive putdowns of Bianca. When Cassio insults Bianca to Iago, Othello's responses to Cassio's statements do not quite reach the ears of the mute characters of the play, the audience, members made characters in spite of themselves because of the actors' liberal use of what is generally understood to be audience space. Othello has not completely left the stage, signifying that he is still playing the role of a center-stage character, though obviously overlooked and unheeded by his fellow stage-mates. In this moment of helplessly hiding and watching, unable to understand or affect the events on center stage, Othello himself has now become the audience's equal in his own drama. As if watching a play himself, Othello preempts Cassio's next words and supposes more intimate details than the former lieutenant has actually exposed. Othello as audience to his worst fears is unable to stop the horrors of infidelity he believes have already begun. Othello's rumbling bass undulates in and out of Cassio's animated tenor descriptions, bereft of even the dignity of silent pauses in Iago and Cassio's conversation, so that Othello may soliloquize about his anguish. Othello is stripped of everything: even his presence and influence as a character on the stage, to say nothing of his role as

Desdemona's sole sexual partner, have been temporarily usurped by Cassio. All that remains of Othello during this personally terrifying experience is his fundamental sense of trust, truth, and honor, so tragically twisted against him by Iago.

The characters of *Without Mouths* did not hide behind swords. Breaking away from the Shakespearean tradition of staging fights in which feuding characters draw blades and stand at a safe distance making menacing faces at each other and the occasional statically posed near-violent act, all actors were required to throw themselves completely into any behavior, as when Othello casually nearly strangles Iago and pins her to the floor while threatening her, "just short of going too far," as I often reminded them as I pushed for even more. We achieved a breakthrough shortly before the production itself.

The fact that those actors who needed to act out the most violence were the least violent people in the cast proved both amusing and challenging during rehearsals. Violent contact between actors was extensively rehearsed, breaking the play's overall style of natural spontaneity. In their own ways, each fight or violent scene remained true to the spirit of improvisation. After the basic physical framework of those specific scenes was meticulously arranged, the actors still had to deal with changes in set.

For instance, in the final scene, Othello grabs a fleeing Desdemona by the throat with one hand and, in one swift movement, pulls her backward onto the bed and strangles her. Perhaps surprisingly, this scene produced the least bruises and sore actors. Ceschino, a high school Varsity wrestler and Notre Dame fencing team sabre-ist accustomed to controlling his own and other men's bodies, had, by this time, already practiced near strangulation of Iago, so he knew how to execute his moves. Ashley,

lurching painfully backward and flying three feet through the air to crash back onto her prop bed, followed Ceschino's gentle pull by the throat. Rehearsals of the scene used a courtyard chaise longue at IUSB. In spite of the splintered wood of the rehearsal prop, Ashley only complained about pain or possible danger when stage direction was given that made Othello's action and Desdemona's gravity-defying fall look less dramatic and safer. Happy to keep the action looking authentic and my actors without whiplash, I did not press the adoption of a "safer" murder scene.

In *Without Mouths*, a six-foot-five, two hundred-twenty pound Cassio, and a six foot plus, two hundred-fifty pound Roderigo bodyslam each other around a stage that must have seemed, to the audience, far too small to contain this kind of action without soon compromising everyone's safety; therefore, the audience was led through the scene to act out the Cyprians' relief, expressed by mid-act sighs and post-performance commentary, and faith in Othello's power when his thundering voice alone was enough to make the two clashing gladiators stop in their tracks and hang their heads.

The poignancy of this scene was increased when Othello lent the weight of his demonstrably powerful arm to his threats of castigation and allowed the diminutive Desdemona a moment to chastise her bodyguard and her rejected suitor for disturbing her honeymoon night. After Othello broke up Cassio and Roderigo's fight by staging his adored Desdemona's rebuke as the ultimate judgment provoking his own punishment of Cassio, it became clear that Desdemona was the symbol of all that Othello had achieved and could lose. From the fight scene on, when Desdemona seemed to Ceschino's Othello to do an about-face as she pleaded for the reinstatement of Cassio as lieutenant, Othello struggled to maintain affected control.

Matt and Tedd, as Roderigo and Cassio, were required to show at least part of their drunken tussle in Act II onstage. Both actors being tall, broad and fit, the idea of their needing to practice how to fight, rather than just practicing the choreography of the fight, did not initially cross my mind. I suppose I assumed that if I, approximately half the weight of either of the two and with a delicate build, could easily fight and feign injury onstage, then so would they.

I must admit, both men naturally killed their characters well onstage during performances. While the deaths or collapses of the two at the end of the play were rehearsed, both actors displayed a natural knack for absorbing one another's assaults. This would have been perfect had they been nonviolent bodyguards. One had grown up and reached his junior year of college without fighting anyone other than his brothers when he was very young. Considering they were older brothers, his preparation to be effectively violent was minimal. The other had a similar background, too liked by others to ever be picked on. The fact that they physically looked like they could easily crush somebody probably helped.

Nevertheless, for this production, I was bent on making them perform what I thought was a simple but necessarily disturbing short fight. During one evening rehearsal at my home, I took both Matt and Tedd into the backyard. We had just had a successful death of Roderigo inside, Matt convincing in his performance of Roderigo, weak from a stab wound courtesy of Cassio, strangled to death with his own cravat as he crawled across the rehearsal "stage" looking for help. Tedd and Anh had done wonders with their lovers, and all seemed hopeful. A large wooded backyard still thickly strewn with leaves from winter, the grounds were excellent to cushion the actors' falls as they practiced. Up

till now, Tedd and Matt had been putting their hearts into this vignette, but the problem remained that they were just too nice to each other in their first fight scene. Having long been used by my Titan younger brothers for wrestling, fencing, soccer, and sprint practice, I knew what I had to do.

After Cassio and Rodrigo gently threatened one another in the gloaming woods behind my Tudor home, as was their habit by now, I pulled one out of the scene, instructing him to speak his lines as I stood in for him. As the scene built to a fight, the remaining actor had to defend himself against my very real and absolutely ruthless pokes, shoves, and non-bruising assaults. Each of them practiced their lines like this a few times before I set them loose to have at each other again. By the time we went back inside, they had elevated their performance of the fight scene to a highly realistic level that left both of them red-faced, panting, smelled as if they had been sweating for a long time, and covered with leaves and mud. They were very proud of themselves, and the rest of the cast finally had reason to hope that the clash of the gladiators would not be the ruin of the play's verisimilitude.

The success of each character has depended on the compatibility of the personal traits of each actor with his or her character. While it has been known that many wonderful interpretations of dramatic characters have been done by actors with few similarities to the character, I believe that even those actors share some strong trait with their characters; otherwise their performances would be weak. Even if the only commonality is a shared morbid fascination between the actor and his character, the empathic interpretation of the character's life is established. From Cassio's physical personification of the character's "golden boy" background to Othello's displayed

increasing sensation of caged anxiety—pacing the length of the stage like a tiger—and from Bianca's shy girl next door girlfriend to Roderigo's tortured, lonely soldier, the actors' own backgrounds have allowed the characters to be portrayed as they have been interpreted in this literary analysis. Without their own quirks and foibles to contribute to the life of the production, there could be no communication of the heart of this story to the audience. However, the intimate audience's thunderous applause and catcalls each night confirmed my opinion, as director, that exceptionally fortunate casting and ruthlessly focused editing resulted in a production that exceeded my most sanguine expectations. I have been invited to help choreograph Texas Southern University's spring production of *The Wiz* and to stage a film version of *Without Mouths.*

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